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SUBJECT: WOMEN IN INDIA: TAMIL NADU'S IRON LADY J. JAYALALITHAA

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Movie-star turned politician J. Jayalalithaa's political career embodies many of the contradictions inherent in the history of successful female politicians in India's otherwise patriarchal society. A man brought her into politics but she rose to the height of power on her own, breaking new ground for women as she went along. Known as Tamil Nadu's "Iron Lady," she is famous for her toughness. Her autocratic style has led to complete domination of her political party, whose followers fawn over her with slavish displays of obedience to her commands. She has succeeded in Tamil Nadu's male dominated political environment by literally reversing traditional stereotypes: Jayalalithaa is widely seen as the toughest, most muscular political figure in the state. She has leveraged this image of strength into political power, serving multiple terms as Chief Minister of a state of more than 65 million people and demonstrating that India's women can make a mark on their nation's politics. End summary.

Brash young movie star follows lover into politics

¶2. (SBU) Sixty-one year-old J. Jayalalithaa (DOB 2/24/1948) stormed the Tamil movie scene as a precocious, pathbreaking teen-ager. Despite her staid image today, she started her career as a sharp contrast to the middle-aged, saree-clad archetype of the Tamil heroine. Jayalalithaa was the first Tamil film star to appear on screen in a western-style skirt. She was best known as the leading heroine and mistress of matinee idol M. G. Ramachandran (MGR). MGR, who was considerably older than Jayalalithaa, founded the AIADMK (All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam) party in 1972, as a break away from the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, the grand old Tamil nationalist party that led the Dravidian movement. MGR eventually brought Jayalalithaa into politics, first giving her a position in the AIADMK in 1982 and later nominating her to the Rajya Sabha in ¶1984.

First woman to serve full term
as Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu

¶3. (SBU) Although she owed her early political career to her relationship with MGR, Jayalalithaa asserted herself following MGR's death in 1987. She struggled for three years with his widow for control of the party, finally prevailing in 1990. She soon led the AIADMK to a sweeping victory in the assembly elections of 1991, riding a wave of revulsion against the party's arch-rival, the DMK, which was seen as indirectly complicit in the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi due to its closeness to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam

(LTTE). She became Tamil Nadu's second female Chief Minister (MGR's widow was the first, serving only 28 days following her husband's death), and the first woman to serve a full term as Chief Minister of the state from 1991-1996.

14. (SBU) Widespread allegations of corruption marked Jayalalithaa's first term in office. She was arrested on corruption charges and held in pre-trial detention for 28 days after leaving office. The DMK government that succeeded her filed a dozen corruption cases against her, which led to two convictions in the lower courts. Although the two convictions prevented Jayalalithaa from personally contesting, her AIADMK won a majority in the 2001 state assembly elections. The state's Governor swore her in as Chief Minister in May 2001, but three months later the Supreme Court of India ruled her appointment as Chief Minister null and void. She stepped down and named a party sidekick to the Chief Minister's post. Jayalalithaa ruled from behind the throne until the Madras High Court overturned both convictions. She then contested and won a by-election, becoming Chief Minister again in March 2002 until her party's defeat in 2006.

Tamil Nadu's "Iron Lady"

15. (SBU) Jayalalithaa developed a reputation for having an iron hand as Chief Minister, especially on law and order issues. First taking office soon after the Rajiv Gandhi assassination, Jayalalithaa ordered a crackdown on the LTTE, which long had operated openly in the state. A bureaucrat who held a key security portfolio at the time told post that Jayalalithaa ordered him to do "whatever it takes to finish off the LTTE" in Tamil Nadu, even if it

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required extrajudicial killings of LTTE associates in the state. Even her fiercest critics acknowledge Jayalalithaa's aggressive approach went a long way towards pushing the LTTE out of Tamil Nadu. Her tough-on-crime posture was not limited to the LTTE. In 2004, during her second term as Chief Minister, Tamil Nadu police shot and killed the forest bandit Veerappan. Veerappan had defied the authorities for decades, killing more than a hundred people (including policemen and forest rangers) while reigning over vast stretches of the state's forests.

16. (SBU) Jayalalithaa was hard on the state's bureaucrats. She regularly punished civil servants who displeased her by suspending or transferring them to unpleasant assignments and locations. For example, she summarily suspended her Home Secretary for supporting bail for an accused in a terrorist bombing case. The Home Secretary had supported the bail plea on humanitarian grounds, as the accused was physically ill. In 2003 Jayalalithaa dismissed 170,000 striking government employees; a court reinstated them shortly thereafter. But her decision came back to haunt Jayalalithaa as the ire of the fired employees and their families is believed to have played a significant role in the electoral drubbing the AIADMK took in 2004.

Political party or cult of personality?

17. (SBU) Jayalalithaa is the consummate autocrat. Her total domination of the AIADMK is legendary. A prominent Congress party official described the Tamil Nadu political parties this way: "The DMK isn't a party, it's a social movement. Congress isn't a party, it's a mob that comes together for elections. And the AIADMK isn't a political party, it's a personality cult." Jayalalithaa casts a huge and menacing shadow over her party. Even in private meetings with Consulate officers, AIADMK leaders never call her by her name; they call her "Amma" (Tamil for mother), "Madam," or "our Leader." Their offices, vehicles, and homes are festooned with multiple pictures of Jayalalithaa. Senior AIADMK leaders, especially men, used to physically prostrate themselves before her to demonstrate their obeisance. Jayalalithaa has since started to discourage the practice after the English language media began to mock it.

18. (SBU) Her party's devotion to her literally marks Chennai's visual landscape. Visitors to Tamil Nadu soon take note of the

political parties' liberal use of billboards, flags, and posters. But Jayalalithaa's AIADMK surpasses the others in using them to demonstrate their political fealty. Gigantic cut-out posters and paintings of the AIADMK leader dot the city, with representations of Jayalalithaa through the ages -- from young movie star to today's more matronly political look. Her supporters' fervor takes on a religious tone. At a major intersection near the Consulate there is a three-story picture of Jayalalithaa with the words "Amma is God" directly above the AIADMK leader's head. In the past her supporters have run into trouble with religious groups for depicting her variously as a Hindu goddess and the Virgin Mary.

¶9. (SBU) Her dominance over the AIADMK extends beyond symbolism. Jayalalithaa is the party's sole decision-maker; even the most mundane matters require her personal approval. For example, an AIADMK contact told post that he would need Jayalalithaa's permission in order to participate in a three week IVLP program. She accepts counsel from a very limited circle of advisors, none of whom is allowed to become too powerful on their own.

An unusual relationship, extreme corruption

¶10. (SBU) The unmarried Jayalalithaa has long been associated with Sasikala Natarajan. Sasikala, as she is widely known, is variously referred to as Jayalalithaa's "confidante," "companion," and "associate." Their relationship is widely assumed to be a sexual one, but this is never been openly acknowledged by them or expressed in the state's mainstream media. The 1995 marriage of Sasikala's nephew V.N. Sudhakaran saw the intersection of their unique relationship and the corruption allegations that have long hounded Jayalalithaa. Then Chief Minister Jayalalithaa formally adopted Sudhakaran as her son prior to the marriage. She hosted the wedding, making liberal use of public facilities, workers, and funds in the process. According to media reports, the wedding was

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performed before 100,000 guests in a thirty acre tent which had been designed by movie art directors. The lavishness of the wedding made national and international news, and is widely credited with leading to her 1996 defeat at the polls. A senior member of The Hindu's editorial staff told post that although Indian voters expect some corruption from their political leaders, Jayalalithaa's "ostentatiousness went too far" for the electorate. He added that Sudhakaran's wedding was "the final straw."

Business-friendly and efficient

¶11. (SBU) Jayalalithaa, who took office just as India began to open its economy, has been described by business executives and AIADMK sources as a "pro-business" politician who is "friendly" to multinational corporations. She worked to bring foreign investors to Tamil Nadu, laying the groundwork for big-ticket projects by Ford, DuPont, and Hyundai. Many Indian business leaders have told post that although the AIADMK and DMK are both corrupt, they prefer Jayalalithaa because her AIADMK is more efficient at delivering once paid. Centralization of power in the AIADMK means that things move quickly once Jayalalithaa gets her cut: her subordinates snap to attention when she approves a project. "If I pay her, I know my job will get done," one contact told post, "but with the DMK you can pay Karunanidhi and another ten guys will still come asking for more." International businesspeople also appreciate Jayalalithaa's excellent convent-educated English speaking ability, which stands in stark contrast to the majority of Tamil Nadu politicians who have very limited English skills.

A tough woman succeeding a man's world

¶12. (SBU) Comment: Jayalalithaa stands alone in Tamil Nadu's male dominated political world. Although a man helped her into politics, she climbed to the peaks of power on her own drive, intellect, and political acumen. She did so by going toe-to-toe with the DMK party and its collection of hyper-masculine leaders, many of whom (Chief Minister Karunanidhi included) publicly maintain "second wives."

Her ruthlessness -- including her willingness to sanction violence in pursuit of her goals -- eventually reversed the traditional view of gender roles, leading the public to see Jayalalithaa as the toughest person in Tamil Nadu politics. Like the old joke that Indira Gandhi was the only man in her cabinet, people frequently say that Jayalalithaa is the only man in the AIADMK. Also like Indira Gandhi, Jayalalithaa has tapped into the traditional Indian veneration of the power of goddesses, going so far as to depict herself as one.

¶13. (SBU) Comment continued: Caste and gender considerations also fueled Jayalalithaa's rise to power. She shrewdly countered the DMK's other backward caste (OBC) support base by pulling together a coalition primarily based on the highest caste, (Brahmins like herself), the lowest caste, (the Dalits), along with one OBC group, the Thevars. Jayalalithaa won a substantial percentage of the important female vote, which is prized for its reliably high turnout. She did so by appealing to women in ways both subtle and overt. She subtly portrayed herself as a woman bucking the entrenched power of the historically masculine DMK party. She overtly played for women's votes with programs directly aimed at them, including offering free bicycles to young girls and providing support to women's self-help groups. Jayalalithaa's multiple terms as Chief Minister, ruling over a state of more than 65 million people, remain a testament to the ability of women in India to make their mark on politics. End comment.

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